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“Why would you want to do that?”: defining emotional dirty work

This article considers how and why people work with difficult emotions. Extending Hughes' typology of the physical, social and moral taints that constitute 'dirty work' the article explores the nature of a previously neglected and undefined concept, *emotional dirt*. Drawing on data from a situated ethnographic study of Samaritans, we consider how the handling of difficult and burdensome emotions, which are often written out of rational accounts of work, is outsourced to others who act as society's agents in the containment of emotional dirt. We provide the first explicit definition of emotional dirt, and contribute an extension to the existing tripartite classification of occupational taint. Moreover, in naming emotional dirt we seek to open up a sphere of research dedicated to understanding its emergence, nature and relational effects. To this end we demonstrate how taint emerges as a sociological consequence of the performance of emotional labour as emotional dirty work, whilst considering how management of the difficult, negative or out-of-place emotions of others can be framed as a positive experience such that it can be good to feel bad when handling emotional dirt.

Key words: Dirt; Dirty work; Emotional Labour; Ethnography; Management; Samaritans; Stigma; Suicide

Introduction

At one time or another most of us are required to engage in tasks we think of as grubby, humiliating or unethical – dirty tasks that impact negatively upon our sense of occupational identity or personal dignity. Some of us are required to undertake more of this 'dirty work' (Hughes, 1958) than others. Work may be defined as dirty in so far as:

‘It may be simply physically disgusting. It may be a symbol of degradation, something that wounds one’s dignity. Finally, it may be dirty work in that it in some way goes counter to the more heroic of our moral conceptions’ (Hughes, 1951:319).

Examples of occupations defined by such work include road sweepers, meat cutters, care home attendants, morticians, abortion nurses, shoeshines and sex shop workers (Stannard, 1973; Meara, 1974; Chiapetta-Swanson, 2005; Tyler, 2012). Traditionally the nature and effects of dirty work have been understood in terms of the *physical*, *social* and *moral* taints (Hughes, 1951, 1958, 1962) that result from contact with different types of dirt or ‘dirty tasks’: the blood that speaks to the physical contamination of butchery, the subservience of the shoeshine that infers social mortification, or the dealing in sex that threatens to stain the moral character of those in adult theatres. It has generally been assumed that this tripartite classification exhausts the sources of taint that might be experienced in the course of work (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). While not wishing to problematize (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011) the core assumptions underpinning the extant analysis of physical, social and moral taint, we do challenge the assumption that there are no other sources of work-based taint. We do this based on two inter-related observations. First, the occupational landscape that framed Hughes’ original construction of dirty work (1951, 1958, 1962) has changed, and with it the focus of many work based tasks and taints. For example, since 1951 the proportion of the UK workforce toiling in manufacturing and construction has fallen from almost half to 17%, while those engaged in service sector occupations has almost doubled to 81% (Office for

National Statistics, 2013). This change in the relative composition of occupations marks a shift from the requirements and dirt of manual labour to greater tertiary sector concern with service provision, face work and emotions. Second, this shift in occupational types has been accompanied by growing interest in the place of emotions in work contexts. Defined as emotional labour, such work has been studied in terms of its nature and effects, with particularly attention to the psychological consequences of such labour (Hochschild, 1989; Grandey, 2000; Schaubroeck & Jones, 2000). Less well considered have been the sociological effects of emotional labour, particularly where contact with burdensome or unwanted emotions threaten to taint or stigmatise the worker. Such consideration requires that research be undertaken in that which Boyle & Healy (2003:356) identify as ‘emotion-laden’ organisations, defined by the centrality of emotional labour and the ‘degree to which service delivery is about dealing with or processing life-changing events such as birth, death or divorce’. To this end, we explore the emotional labour of Samaritans: a UK charitable organisation dedicated to providing support for people in emotional distress. In so doing we usefully extend the classification of sources of ‘dirt based’ taint to include those that arise from that which we name *emotional dirt*.

The article unfolds by first considering how Hughes’ (1951, 1958 and 1962) account of dirty work is central to our understanding of why certain tasks are deemed undesirable and degrading, and how this understanding has been developed as part of a widely used tripartite classification of occupational taint (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). Having noted the relative absence of emotion in this tripartite scheme we consider the manner in which the literature on emotions in organisations might usefully attend to a form of dirt and work that we conceptualise as *emotional dirty work*. Drawing on data from a situated ethnography (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000) we make the case for seeing Samaritans as organisational ‘agents’

(Hughes, 1962) of society's emotional dirty work. Specifically, we explore how their work with people who are upset, isolated, suicidal or abusive might be constructed as dealing with an under conceptualised form of dirt. We consider how such dirt is to be defined, and why the handling of such dirt through the emotional labour of Samaritans threatens to taint the labourer. In this way emotional dirty work – and the emotional labour it requires – is shown to have potentially negative social consequences. Yet we demonstrate how Samaritans frame such challenging work with negative emotions as good and satisfying work. We conclude with a call for more research into this newly defined concept across other occupational tasks and sectors.

Dirt, work & emotion

Everett Hughes (1951, 1958 and 1962) is credited with providing the foundational analysis (Simspon et al. 2011) of dirty work in respect of its emergence, nature and relational effects. Hughes never defines directly what he means by dirt or dirty work, preferring instead to allude to the texture of such work through example. Drawing on cases as diverse as the apartment block janitor (Hughes, 1958) and SS prison guard (Hughes, 1962) he emphasizes the manner in which dirty work might be degrading, undignified or immoral. Dirty work is cast as a necessary evil that repulses. Its very existence reminds us 'that the boundaries that separate vice from virtue, good from evil, pure from polluted are permeable, and worse, necessarily permeable' and that '[t]o our disgust, good is always engaging in unseemly compromises that implicate us' (Miller 1997, p. 185 cited in Kreiner et al., 2006:619).

For Hughes (1958, 1962) dirty work arises from a perceived need to tackle a problem, issue or peoples that threaten the solidarity and self-conception of a given community. It speaks to a set of dividing practices through which in-groups define and disassociate themselves from certain others on the basis that they are 'dirty' 'lousy' or 'unscrupulous' (Hughes, 1962).

This emphasis on dirty work as a dividing practice is also to be found in the work of Mary Douglas (1966). Focusing on the symbolic nature of dirt, Douglas contends that it is a social construct ‘created by the differentiating activity of the mind... a by-product of the creation of order’ (Douglas, 1966:161). Douglas is at pains to point out that there is no such thing as ‘absolute dirt’. Rather, dirt is in the eye of the beholder who, having perceived it, shuns it because it offends against a preferred order. This implies two conditions:

‘a set of ordered relations and a contravention of that order. Dirt then, is never a unique, isolated event. Where there is dirt there is a system. Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements’ (Douglas, 1966:35)

Dirt is defined by its context, by its relation to preferred orders, by its perceived threat to those orders and by a desire to keep it at a distance. Dirt is in its simplest terms ‘matter out of place’ (Douglas, 1966:35). When applied to people, dirt’s symbolic and social significance lies in its ability to separate ‘clean us’ from ‘dirty them’. For Douglas (1966) and Hughes (1962) dirt can serve as a delineating practice through which in-groups are separated from out-groups in so far as the latter are positioned as a threat to the order and solidarity of a community. There is then a common thread running through the more symbolic analysis of Douglas (1966), with its useful provision of a definition of dirt as ‘matter out of place’, and the more normative tone of Hughes’ (1958,1962) writing. Both speak to dividing practices that distinguish the worthwhile, acceptable, clean, pure, orderly, unblemished and good: from the worthless, unacceptable, tainted, polluted, chaotic, stigmatized and bad (Selmi, 2012). They also contend, as Ashforth and Kreiner (1999:415) note, that dirtiness is essentially a ‘social construction: it is not inherent in the work itself or the workers but is imputed by people, based on necessarily subjective standards of cleanliness and purity’. Yet, fear of contamination (literal, symbolic, moral) on the part of those who classify ‘dirt’ means that they are rarely willing to come into contact with such matter themselves – to deal with it – thereby creating a need for a third party or agent

(Hughes, 1962) in the form of the *dirty worker*. As considered below, it is this third party agent who runs the risk of being tainted or stigmatized by their association with dirty tasks and problems.

Dirty work occupations & taint

With few exceptions (see McMurray, 2012) dirty work is seen as deleterious work (Bergman and Chalkley 2007; Haber *et al.*, 2011) undertaken by those with few alternatives or those at the lower levels of organizational or societal hierarchy (Hughes 1958, Jervis 2001). Dirty workers are cast as out-groups or ‘pariahs’ (Hughes, 1962:7) whose members are ‘spoiled, blemished, devalued, or flawed to various degrees’ as a consequence of the stigma that arises from their work (Kreiner *et al.*, 2006:621). Even where dirty work is deemed necessary for the clean and orderly function of society at large (Mills *et al.*, 2007) dirty attributions effectively devalue the worker, marking them so that: ‘an individual who might have been received easily into ordinary social intercourse possesses a trait that can obtrude itself upon attention and turn those of us whom he [sic] meets away from him... He possesses a stigma, an undesired differentness’ (Goffman, 1997: 73).

Within the dirty work literature such traits are described as ‘taints’. For the most part ‘stigma’ and ‘taint’ are used interchangeably within the literature, and while the latter is not defined it is to be observed that in everyday language to taint is to stain, blemish, sully or tincture some thing or someone. When applied to dirty work taint speaks to the attribution of an undesired quality or association that reduces the prestige or esteem of an occupation (Hughes, 1958; Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999; Mills *et al.* 2007). Research into dirty work seeks to explore ‘how taint is constructed and attributed to a particular occupation at a particular moment... by helping to reveal the socially constructed boundaries of acceptability

and legitimacy and of purity and impurity' (Stanley and Mackenzie-Davey, 2012:60-61). Up to now it has generally been assumed that there are three types of taint associated with dirty work (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999). The first is *physical taint* associated with effluence, grime, death or deleterious and unpleasant working conditions (Meara 1974; Jervis, 2001; McMurray, 2012). Second is *social taint* as a consequence of association with stigmatized publics or servility to others (see Stannard, 1973; Haber et al. 2011). Third is *moral taint* as a result of proximity to notions of sin, dubious virtue or deception (see Ashforth & Kreiner, 2002; Stanley and Mackenzie-Davey, 2012; Tyler, 2012). A single occupation may be associated with more than one taint, as in the case of the janitor who deals with the physical garbage and filth generated by the occupants of an apartment block, while also being socially tainted by their servility to others (Hughes, 1958).

Kreiner *et al.* (2006) note that where once the social psychology literature assumed that workers' responses to such taint would be almost universally negative in respect of low self-esteem and identity destruction, there is now growing evidence of a much broader range of cognitive, affective and behavioral responses to such attributions. This is most readily demonstrated through appeal to Ashforth and Kreiner's (1999) model on the ways in which dirty workers reframe, recalibrate or refocus the meanings associated with their tainted work so that negative connotations are down played and positive narratives inserted in their stead. This might involve: wrapping the dirty particulars of a job in more abstract or uplifting values, downplaying the amount of time spent in contact with dirt, prioritising the non-stigmatised aspects of an occupation, or condemning those outside the occupation as unworthy of passing judgment; all with a view to creating and maintaining more positive occupational identities (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999).

Developments in the conceptualisation of dirty work therefore suggest that it is possible to construct positive occupational identities in the shadow of task-based taint (Tracy and Scott, 2006). It is our contention that Ashforth and Kreiner's (1999) refinement of Hughes' (1951, 1958, 1962) tripartite classification of dirty work and taint might be usefully informed by a number of significant developments in our understanding of the emotional dimensions of work (see for example Vincent, 2011; Ward and McMurray 2011; Toegel *et al.* 2013). Specifically, our own experience of research in the field of emotional labour leads us to consider whether *emotions* might be positioned as dirt? If it is the case, then there is the potential for a new classification of work-based taint that has been under-observed and under-conceptualised in terms of both its nature and occupational effects. Moreover, it would challenge the assertion that it is safe to 'assume that the physical, social and moral dimensions exhaust the domain sources of taint' (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999:415). Accordingly, the next section provides a brief account of the place of emotion in the study of work and organizing, starting with its marginalisation.

Emotion as Marginal, Dirty and Tainting

Re-presentation of the 'modernist' organisation placed emotion in ontological opposition to reason. Emotion was pushed beyond the boundaries of organisation in the belief that 'efficiency should not be sullied by the irrationality of personal feelings' (Hancock & Tyler, 2001:130). Following this Weberian logic, emotions were perceived to be 'out of place' and were systematically marginalised in pursuit of masculine ideals of rationality within the context of organisations (and arguably, society more broadly). Hancock & Tyler's (2001) use of the term 'sullied' in relation to personal feelings implies that not only were emotions and feelings out of place, they were in some way dirty; threatening to taint or contaminate the clean rational logic of efficiency. In this sense emotions were seen as marginal or disruptive to the functioning of the modern organisation.

This marginalisation of emotion was challenged when Hochschild (1983) proposed that not all emotions were excluded from organising. Her observation of the ways in which Delta Airline's flight attendants were paid, trained and supervised to manage their own emotions to create an on-board atmosphere of 'cheer' among passengers suggested that feelings were increasingly commodified and controlled through the prescription of 'emotional labour'. She defined emotional labour as the ability to 'induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others' (Hochschild, 1983:7). However, the performance of positive emotions such as 'cheer' served to obscure from view other emotions that were perceived by the airline to be 'out of place': those feelings of fatigue from the incredibly physically demanding elements of the job; fear of the potentially imminent dangers of faulty equipment, and; the discomfort and embarrassment from unwanted sexual attention from male passengers. In this sense, certain emotions remain marginal to, or outside of, preferred displays depending on the ways in which emotions are filtered, modified and constructed by organisations and society as acceptable or unacceptable. Such continued marginalisation is even more evident when one considers how Hochschild's definition of emotional labour asserts a dyadic relationship between the emotional labourer's management of their own emotions and the impact this should or would have on the recipient, often a customer. Excluded from Hochschild's definition, and subsequent discussions of emotional labour, is the impact on the emotional labourer of the feelings, emotions and behaviours of those 'others' in whom the emotional labourer is required to 'produce the proper state of mind' (Hochschild, 1983:7). We cannot assume, for example, that those 'others' are passive recipients of the emotional labourers efforts or that their feelings and behaviours will not impact on the emotional labourer. Such service interactions are relational, and above all emotional.

To date, sociology has focused on the nature and texture of the emotional performances required of emotional labourers. Examples include: the way nurses are expected to care and offer support through performances of empathetic or positive emotional labour (Bolton, 2000a; Korzcynski, 2003); the contempt that debt collectors reportedly show for, and the fear they incite in, debtors through performances of antipathetic emotional labour (Rafaeli & Sutton, 1991; Korzcynski, 2003), and; the processes through which GP receptionists perform emotional neutrality in an attempt to cope with the emotional complexity of the job role (Ward and McMurray, 2011). This is not to say that the consequences of performing emotional labour have been overlooked, at least in psychological terms. Psychology as a discipline has focused on the negative consequences of control, commodification and performance by usefully pointing towards the potential for burnout (Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002), exhaustion (Grandey, 2003) and stress (Pugliesi, 1999). Yet, while there is a substantial literature dedicated to understanding, identifying and mitigating the psychological consequences of managing the emotions of others through performances of emotional labour (including Schaubroeck & Jones, 2000; Grandey, 2000) there is little by way of comparable study of the potential *sociological consequences* of such labour (see Korzcynski & Evans' (2013) recent analysis of status relations in the context of customer abuse for an exception). What does it mean for the emotions of clients or customers to present as difficult or burdensome? If such emotions are outside preferred behaviours and organisational scripts does this mean that they are essentially matter out of place (Douglas, 1966)? If so, what are the consequences of dealing with such matter – dirt – in terms of the position and standing of the emotional labourer?

The dirty work literature does touch on the position of emotion in so far as it promotes the notion that ‘dirty work is an activity embedded with meanings that are also emotional’ (Simpson *et al.*, 2011: 209). Even so, emotion management tends to be described as a by-product of physical, social or moral dirt. For example, Chiappetta-Swanson (2005) describes the experiences of Genetic Termination Nurses who in addition to coping with the physical and moral dirt of elective foetal termination are left to mop up the grief and loss of crying patients when all other health practitioners have stepped aside. These nurses work to give patients a ‘sense of emotional control’ at a time when other occupational groups have absented themselves for fear of being tainted (Chiappetta-Swanson, 2005: 108). Something similar is to be found in Sanders’ (2010) study of veterinary technicians in which the physically dirty work of pet euthanasia and disposal is deemed emotionally dirty in so far as technicians must deal with the intense sorrow of owners. This emotional component is regarded by workers as ‘far more worrisome than the physically defiling elements’ (Sanders, 2010: 246).

These accounts, including those in which the term emotional dirty work is used but not defined (see Sanders, 2010), highlight the continuing need to explore the ways in which such relational work might be considered a distinct if overlapping form of dirty work. They also raise questions around whether it is possible to conceptualise the sociological consequences of being associated with dirty emotions (a project that, until now, has been neglected). The resulting challenge can be summarised in three broad questions: is it reasonable to speak of emotional dirt? If so, what are the sociological implications of working with the emotional dirt of others in terms of taint? Finally, if individuals are engaged in emotional dirty work that is potentially tainting, it begs the question: ‘Why would you want to do that?’

The Study

The aim of the study was to understand how Samaritans experience and interpret the work they do in providing support for people in emotional distress. This included a desire to ‘experience’, in some limited sense, the ‘environment, problems, background, language, rituals, and social relations of a more-or-less bounded and specific group of people’ (Van Maanen, 2011:3) with a view to better understanding the activities and sense-making that constitute their day-to-day work. Pursuant to this aim we employed a situated ethnography of Samaritans between 2012 and 2013. A situational ethnographic approach implies a more concentrated focus on a particular phenomenon rather than an all-embracing attempt to capture the entirety of a culture and its relations (Alvesson & Deetz 2000). As described below, this entails detailed observation of routine practices and critical incidences so that we may arrive at some understanding of what it means to be an emotionally dirty worker, including the sociological consequences of such work.

Context

The research focused on the nature of the work undertaken by Samaritans who sit at the end of telephone lines listening to the concerns and fears of anonymous callers. Samaritans interact with users personally, most often through the voice work of a telephone call (lasting anything from a few seconds to several hours) in which they respond to a stranger’s request that they listen to the latter’s emotional problems and concerns. We observed Samaritans working shifts of between four to six hours at least once a week. All Samaritans go through a two-stage training and mentoring process designed to ensure that new recruits understand what are deemed appropriate emotional displays and desired emotional outcomes as part of their organisationally prescribed emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983). These prescriptions centre on providing empathetic and non-judgemental listening spaces intended to encourage more reflective and emotional balanced positions on the part of the caller. A range of peer

observation and regularised reporting systems serve to both support and monitor the labour of Samaritans. It is within this context that we undertook our study of emotional labour as a potential site for dirty work and taint.

Data collection

The primary mode of data collection involved participant observation of Samaritan work across two branches, one in the north and one in the midlands of England. The purpose of such observation was to achieve the degree of closeness required to understand what it is that Samaritans think they are doing (Geertz, 1973). Practically this involved 180+ hours of ‘in situ’ observation of Samaritan telephone and branch work designed to allow ‘intimate observation of certain parts of their behaviour’ (Hughes, 1984:497). Our practice was to select shifts where we knew at least one Samaritan on duty so that we could build our relationship with them over the weeks and months with a view to gaining deeper insights into the complexities of their organisational life.

For the most part, observation involved sitting in branches listening to Samaritans field calls, debrief to each other, report to leaders, and complete paperwork in the course of morning, day and nightshifts. Our personal participation centred on making the tea, baking flapjack, conversing with Samaritans and listening to debriefs. We were also invited to attend the training of new recruits, meetings with outside agencies and out-reach visits. A template was employed for recording field notes in which descriptions of key events, issues or conversations were separated from emergent analysis (this template is available upon request from the authors). Where the emotional tone of a moment was felt to imply that note taking was inappropriate, observations were written up as soon as possible thereafter.

Considered reflexively the position of the researcher-observer affected the performance of Samaritan work in so far as individuals paused and voiced explanations of processes whose meanings were normally assumed and unsaid. Our presence evoked an apparent need in many Samaritans to explain and justify particular practices, such as non-intervention (considered below). In this sense observations were informed by in-situ conversations with Samaritans as to their experiences, feelings, processes and perceptions as part of an attempt to further understand the meanings they placed on events in their world (Heyl, 2001). For our part we experienced the ‘shock that comes from the sudden immersion in the lifeway’s of a group different to yourself’ (Agar, 1996:100 cited in Cunliffe, 2010:235) especially in relation to the volume and emotional intensity of Samaritan work; such that we became overwhelmed by the vulnerability, despair, misery and unhappiness that were the everyday work of Samaritan calls. We experienced the ‘vicarious trauma’ that can be evoked by research on sensitive topics, along with the potential for exhaustion that can arise from such work (Dickson-Swift *et al.*, 2009). The effect was to heighten our own empathetic understanding of what it might mean to deal with emotional dirt.

To these more nuanced methods (Tracy, 2000) were added six semi-structured interviews with Samaritans who were keen to participate in the study but whom we had not observed. Semi-structured interviews were recorded and fully transcribed. Other texts were also read (e.g. Samaritan policy documents) as part of the process of getting to know the organisation, though they were not explicitly analysed as research artefacts for the present article. In combining these data sources the research employed a variant of triangulation.

Analysis

Claims for triangulation are far from unproblematic. Diverse methods and methodologies may not support each other with the result that production of coherent narratives becomes

problematic. This may also discourage the inclusion of occurrences or utterances that, while useful or potentially enlightening, lack corroboration (Maggs-Rapport, 2000). Such an approach would also suggest a search for positivistic certainty that is at odds with an ethnographic sensitivity intended to describe individual views and shared cultures from the perspective of participants. Ours is not then a triangulation that employs multiple methods and measurements in order to close in on a 'true' picture of reality. It is more akin to that which Wolfram-Cox and Hassard (2005) describe as holographic convergence. In this variant of triangulation there is an emphasis on identifying cases that best describe the dataset through 'detailed qualitative description of an individual or situation, supplemented by ample quotations and detailed contextual information' with view to constructing pictures of the wider phenomena 'contained within the parts' (Wolfram-Cox & Hassard, 2005:118). In our case the detailed description is derived from our direct observations of Samaritans' voice work with callers, and supported by quotations from in-situ and semi-structured interviews with those labourers; the combination of these various sources giving a 'broad and rich picture of the situation concerned' (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000:204). This included working to ensuring that Samaritans still recognised and held as valid the worlds we described in this newly constituted research object, by adopted the practice of feeding results back to participants (Lindebaum and Fielden, 2011) through both oral and paper presentations. Their observations and responses were then usefully rewoven into the writing as part of the process of collaborative co-construction (Heyl, 2001).

The analysis itself was inductive in so far as our intention was to 'generate theory grounded in specific instances of empirical observation' (Johnson, 2008:112). This was informed by Glaser and Strauss's (1967) constant comparative method wherein the collection and analysis of observational data proceed iteratively: one informing the other so as to generate theory. Informed by sensitising concepts (Johnson, 2008) emergent categories included: emotional

labour, modes of emotional labour, types of caller emotion, the status of caller emotions, the experience of working as a Samaritan, and the routines of Samaritan work. Further data collection enabled addition to and refinement of nascent categories up to the point where detailed qualitative description of representative cases or situations was possible, while also arriving at a point where no major new themes emerged. The result was a number of recurring and well-developed categories with examples grouped together under three main themes: (i) *emotional dirt* – comprising: emotion, emotional labour, empathy, burden, threat, difficult, out of place, outsourced, transgression, solidarity; (ii) *taint* - stigma, marks, outsiders, distancing, visceral, contamination, taboo, and; (iii) *the good call / sin of intervention* - emotional labour, empathy, privilege, limits, divide, intervention, satisfaction, skill, performance, commodification. Each theme is considered in turn below through reference to the work and experiences of Samaritans (pseudonyms being employed to ensure anonymity). As revealed below, emotional dirt is attached/attributed to the expressed feelings of the caller, while taint describes the visceral response of outsiders to an occupation's proximity to such dirt. The good call and sin of intervention consider Samaritan experiences of and responses to such dirty work and taint. We begin with a description of seemingly unrelated and differentiated accounts of caller emotions that combine to construct a picture (Wolfram-Cox & Hassard, 2005) of emotional dirt.

Findings

Emotional Dirt

Compared to the observed lives of meat cutters, janitors, nurses dealing with foetal termination or those engaged in the sex trade, the work of Samaritans has very little of the vivid and immediate repulsion of other dirty occupations. Working in dedicated branches at the end of the telephone line there is no material contamination to speak of. For the most part there is no rich description to be had of physical tasks or encounters that declare spatial

proximity to physical, social or moral filth. We contend that the work of Samaritans is subtler in so far as its relation to matter-out-of-place is hidden in the emotional encounters of two distant people separated and anonymised by a phone line.

To understand the work of Samaritans – and with it the nature of emotional dirt – it is necessary to know something of the calls they handle, both in terms of their range and content. We observed that people contact Samaritans for a wide range of problems including mental health issues, self-harm, sexual abuse, relationship concerns, loneliness, sadness, suicidal feelings or because they are in the process of suicide. From the perspective of Samaritans with whom we spoke many such calls arise because people feel they have nowhere else to turn. Some callers have no one to turn to in a literal sense because they have been placed outside of the help normally offered by the community. Callers like Lula told Samaritans how she had been abused as a child, beaten as a wife and was now the sole carer for her elderly mother, while also struggling with her own mental health problems. Lula was barred from calling the police, social services, the community mental health team, local hospital and fire brigade. Alone and isolated Lula was a regular caller – sometimes calm, sometimes angry and *threatening* – she was what Samaritan Kevin described as one of a growing number of contacts who had been excluded from statutory services because of unseemly emotional outbursts at public servants and apparently inappropriate service demands. In such cases it appeared to Samaritans that their organisation was being used as the contact of last resort for people at the margins of society whose emotional needs were being effectively *outsourced*.

Other calls spoke of emotions that were out of place because they were perceived as a threat to an individual's *self-concept*. For example, we observed Seb take a call from a young married man concerned that he was gay. A sexual encounter with a male colleague at work

had left the caller with feelings and desires he did not understand. He rang Samaritans to talk through his feelings because he felt unable to confide in his wife and unwilling to share his thoughts with male colleagues or friends. His call spoke to feelings that he deemed ‘out of place’ in so far as they disrupted the order of both his masculine and heterosexual lives, effectively threatening his self-concept. As Seb listened he reflected the caller’s thoughts and concerns back to him as part of what we would describe as an empathetic process of listening and emotional care. It was our observation that while the call spoke to moral dirt in so far as sexuality and fidelity may be linked to notions of dubious virtue or sin, Seb made no such judgments in respect of the call or caller. Instead, the matters worked over by Seb were the feelings of the caller in terms of why he felt unable to talk to others, and how events and emotions impacted on his self-concept.

We observed Randolph take a similar call in which he worked through a caller’s fears about cross-dressing. Randolph felt that the “rest of the world still views people like cross dressers as inappropriate, wrong, shocking or strange”. Here there is a hint at the ways in which disruptive or problematic emotions (e.g. caller *fear* over cross-dressing) can overlap with social and moral perceptions of threats to *preferred orders* in so far as such emotions are likely to confuse or contradict treasured classifications and as such be condemned as dirt. It also reminds us that emotional dirt, as with other forms of dirt, is a matter of perspective, such that the boundary between pure and polluted is far from stable; dependent as it is on the sense making of participants and observers.

The overlaps between moral and emotional matter-out-of-place are perhaps most stark, and arguably less equivocal, for Samaritans working with self-confessed paedophiles and abusers. Samaritan Melissa suggested, “...chances are they are ringing you because they know they are going to do something society says is wrong”. Callers were said to be aware that

Samaritans would not judge them, though neither would they condone their actions (more on this below in *The Sin of Intervention*). As long as the call centered on the discussion of feelings, Samaritans would listen and seek to help the caller consider why it is they felt/desired the way they did. However, as Samaritan Mary explains such calls were also far from unproblematic in terms of how those outside the organization perceive the work that Samaritans undertake:

“I think the general public respect the work Samaritans do... But then pedophiles are mentioned and [whispers] that’s a little bit grubby! “We don’t want to know about that! How could you?” But I then say to that well, where can a pedophile go to talk to somebody because there ain’t nowhere.... And you almost have to say “I do not condone pedophilia at all”, you have to put that caveat in just in case.... But these human beings have to talk to somebody, if you want them to stop doing what they are doing what are they supposed to do?”

Here Samaritans work with the feelings and emotions of those who are deemed problematic and dirty by society and redolent of sin. Samaritans such as Mary take on the burden of maintaining the boundary between in-groups and out-groups, clean and dirty, by willingly exposing themselves to the immoral acts, taboos and misplaced feelings of others that threaten the wider community’s sense of *solidarity*. We might understand the sentiment of ‘oh that’s a little bit grubby’ as the sociological consequences of the work undertaken – a product of handling emotions perceived by society as dirty.

There are other types of call such as Samaritan Cybil’s encounter with an elderly woman who could not get anyone to listen to her fears of dying alone; Samaritan Evelyn’s discussion with the person actively committing suicide who just wanted to tell someone why they were taking their own life without being judged or dissuaded, and; Colin’s discussion with a railway ticket master who, unable to confide in his wife or employer, needed to ‘tell someone how he felt’ about having observed a man hop in front of an oncoming train. These were just some

of the examples of Samaritans dealing with ‘caller emotions’ that were *out-of-place* in so far as they had no other apparent space for being worked through, heard or managed.

As diverse as such encounters are; interpreted collectively they describe emotions that are in some important sense out of place. They are positioned by self or other as that which we name as *emotional dirt*. In the above contexts emotional dirt is attached/attributed to the expressed feelings of the caller. This presentation then invites an occupational response in which Samaritans perform emotional labour. We define emotional dirt as *expressed feelings that threaten the solidarity, self-conception or preferred orders of a given individual or community*. To be clear, the attribution of dirty status is not a matter of empirics. It describes a subjective state assigned by either the individual involved or outside observers through which emotions are deemed to be in some sense polluting. Such pollution is repellent to the extent that it threatens a sense of solidarity, stability or order.

We do not discount the possibility of there being other forms or signifiers of emotional dirt particular to other occupational contexts. What is important for the moment is that we recognise the existence of emotion as dirt. Where such dirt occurs in the context of work it requires a particular occupational response. Just as the filth that is attributed to household waste is met by the physical labour of the janitor, so the burden of the emotional dirt associated with the suicidal feelings of others is met by the emotional labour of Samaritans. In so doing they stand as third party agents of dirty work. Moreover, such proximity to dirt carries with it the threat of contamination and taint.

Taint

Few people like to be associated with dirt; hardly surprising given that dirtiness is associated with badness, stigma, danger and that which is to be avoided. So it was for our Samaritans

who, on reading a first draft of this article expressed concern with such a dirty attribution. They were understandably concerned that readers may mistakenly assume that Samaritans thought callers were dirty; an assumption at odds with the values and practices of an organisation predicated on treating callers with non-judgemental respect and empathy. This led to discussion of whether it was right for the researchers to position Samaritan work as dirty work.

The operationalization of physical, social and moral taint forwarded by Ashforth & Kreiner (1999) suggests that all forms of dirty work are united by two common denominators: the visceral repugnance of outsiders to the work, and the question 'how could you do that'. We understand visceral to refer to that 'affecting the viscera or bowels regarded as the seat of emotion; pertaining to, or touching deeply, inward feelings' (Oxford English Dictionary, Online). This emphasis on the embodied experience of feeling aligns with Hochschild's (1983:17) interpretation of feelings as bodily signal functions through which we become aware of our own viewpoint on the world shaped to and by social form. The question then is whether the emotional labour of Samaritans ever elicits such a visceral response?

Cath, like all Samaritans we interacted with, made it clear that personally she felt no embarrassment or sense of personal taint as a consequence of her willingness to explore feelings around the fear, anxiety, sex, abuse and despair of callers. And yet she recognised that "outsiders" may not see it the same way. Mirroring the title of Ashforth and Kreiner's (1999) article *How could you do that?*, Cath noted that friends and acquaintances often comment 'why would you want to do that?' or 'oh no, I couldn't do that!' when they discover the kind of emotional labour that being a Samaritan involves. Time and again Samaritans recounted examples of 'outsiders' distancing themselves from the work of Samaritans. Responding to this article, Samaritan Michelle reinforced the point when she recounted being

introduced at a social gathering to strangers as a Samaritan: “it killed the mood of the party – everyone went quiet and gently moved away”. There was a sense in which their occupation was viewed as necessary yet stigmatising, such that workers were tainted with an undesired differentness. In common with the extant literature on dirt and taint considered above, Samaritan Cath believes that such responses stem from peoples’ fear that “they might, you know, catch it or be touched by it” that they may in some way be tainted if they “get too close to suicide, upset or mental health issues”. As Samaritan Brian noted, theirs is an occupational label that speaks of contact with people that “the rest of us [society]” do not want to know about; apparent “monsters” in the case of paedophiles, which speak of feelings and acts that are deemed threatening and taboo.

In the case of work with paedophiles it was clear that the visceral repugnance evoked by the emotional dirt of the caller’s feelings is reinforced by an overlapping attribution of moral dirtiness as a result of proximity to notions of sin. In this context there is a double sense in which dirty work may ‘leave a mark’ (Samaritan Chris) inviting social prejudice or stigmatisation by outsiders. In the context of Samaritan work we therefore contend that the potential for ‘emotional taint’ arises from proximity to the emotional dirt of others (which may overlap with and being reinforced by other forms of dirt). We have in mind emotions – such as lust, despair, suicidal feelings or hate – to which outsiders experience a visceral repugnance on the basis that the expressed feelings of client/customers/callers are deemed burdensome, taboo or polluting in so far as they threaten to contaminate well-ordered lives. At one level, proximity to such emotion reminds us that so called ‘monsters’ live among us. At another, that the spectre of emotional turmoil is never far away: that to be close to the source, or those who handle it, may in some unspecified sense threaten pollution. In such a context emotional labour imposes a social cost (i.e. taint) on the worker as Samaritans’ very proximity to dirt threatens to mark them as spoiled, blemished or flawed.

The possibility that emotional labour may be tainting work when framed by our definition of emotional dirt is something that has not been considered before. We might, therefore, presume that where emotional labour is undertaken as emotional dirty work and is tainted by its association with the emotional dirt of others it must necessarily present as negatively experienced work. And yet, Samaritans were united in their view that emotional dirty work could also be good and satisfying work. This was most readily manifest in the notion of the ‘good call’ through which job satisfaction was gained, though also restrained by that which we label the ‘sin of intervention’.

The Good Call & the Sin of Intervention

Observing and talking to Samaritans we understood a ‘good call’ to be one for which a volunteer has trained and is able to employ their skills in empathetic listening. They are also encounters in which Samaritans express repletion in ‘being there’ for those with unmet emotional needs. The good call is a difficult and challenging call. As Samaritan Steve concludes an encounter, with someone in the process of committing suicide, it appears as if the call is written on his face. It is written in terms of an empathetic concern and wonder at the emotional pain, loneliness and despair of the other. But there is also a sense of privilege at having been able and available to take their call – “it was a real privilege to be there for them – they kept thanking me, and I would say “don’t thank me, it’s what I’m here for”” (Samaritan Steve).

The notion that Samaritan work was a privilege was a recurrent theme of observed conversations and training, wherein Samaritans spoke of the privilege of being let into the ‘intimate parts of the lives of others’ (Samaritan Cath). ‘Privilege’ suggested a more modest framing of the affect of the work on the worker than the expressed pride observed among

23

those engaged in the physical dirty work of say, meat cutting. In the latter case, workers have been observed to extol a culture of heroic forbearance in the face of tasks that others could not stomach (see Meara, 1974; Ackroyd & Crowdy, 1990; Simpson *et al.*, 2011). Samaritans were more diffident, unwilling to accept praise or credit for having ‘saved another one’ or handled emotions that others might not stomach (though fewer than half the new recruits we observed made it through Samaritan training). Samaritans’ empathetic focus on the ‘other’ engendered a more modest account of self-worth in which there was a quiet contentment at having learnt and employed the skills required to respond to what we understand as the emotional dirt of callers. This served to restrain the overt self-praise exhibited in more masculinised and physical work cultures.

In common with the other forms of dirty work considered above, the ‘good call’ was associated with personal satisfaction, particularly where it allowed a display of skill. Yet, the satisfaction to be gained from dealing with the emotional problems of others as part of the ‘good call’ was circumscribed by organisationally imposed limits on what Samaritans could do for the caller. Claire explained this in terms of limits on the desire to “do more” in the face of an “overwhelming urge to rescue the caller, especially if they are old in my case... I want to find them and make them some tea and give them some scones”. For the modern secular Samaritan such intervention is to be resisted and avoided. Samaritans are not allowed to intervene in the lives of others through action or advice: their task is to listen, encourage reflection and maintain the autonomy and self-determination of the caller. To do otherwise is to risk being asked to leave Samaritans. Thus, while there is a sense in which the dirt that flows down the line might be washed away or cleansed through intervention and direction, all who work within Samaritans know that any personal satisfaction that comes through action may be short lived if they are subsequently required to leave the organisation.

The desire to intervene ‘and feel good about it’ (Samaritan Claire) did not always arise from a desire to help the caller. For example, Samaritan Lin confided between calls that when dealing with paedophiles “sometimes you just want to punch them [screws up her face and fist] but you don’t”. Instead she notes that she must conceal from the caller her disgust and anger at the moral, social and emotional dirt that comes down the telephone line by offering an emotional performance she does not feel. This management of emotions by Samaritans is identifiable as surface acting in that the worker’s outward appearance is managed by pretending to feel what they do not such they deceive others about what we really feel, but do not deceive themselves. Emotional labour is being used here to facilitate the delivery of the emotional support that both the callers and Samaritans as an organisation expect. In this sense, emotional labour is being used to manage the exposure and performance of the worker to emotional dirt (i.e. the lust of the paedophile). Procedures for debriefing to other Samaritans, along with access to counselling support, help the worker cope on a psychological level with the encounter with dirt. This does not however overcome the more sociological effects of being tainted by the encounter with emotional dirt as wider society and local communities still seek an answer to the question ‘What do you want to do that for?’ Samaritan Bob described this difficulty in respect of an on-going choice to either ‘carry on being a proper Samaritan or to be a human being’ as non-Samaritans judge the social acceptability of contact with, and non-intervention in the acts of, those such as paedophiles. In essence the dirty worker faces the possibility of being held accountable for their activities by outsiders who may disapprove of such acts, and hence, the worker performing them.

In the above examples emotional dirty work emerges as part of a wider set of processes intended to rationalise and order emotion. It requires a commodification of emotions in so far as surface acting, empathetic care, or performances of emotional neutrality speak to voice work designed to produce an emotional state in others in the context of organisational

25

controls. Within Samaritans, emotional labour is employed in the management of dirt in such a way that it allows for the play of human agency by skilled workers who juggle the demands posed by organisationally defined 'sins' and personally experienced 'good' calls. This juxtaposition of 'good calls' with 'the sin of intervention' points to the complexity of emotional dirty work in so far as it is a source of overlapping concern, anxiety, satisfaction and performance. Often centred on negative emotional states with overlapping risks from social and moral dirt, it is work that threatens to taint Samaritans due to proximity to burdensome feelings that disrupt preferred social orders and threaten to confuse or complicate the clean/dirty divide. Even so, the good call can be a source of satisfaction for Samaritans, allowing them to employ the listening skills in which they have been trained: a simultaneous challenge and privilege.

Discussion

The aim of this article has been to draw attention to the nature and experience of working with difficult emotions. It has been our contention that such work can be usefully understood as a distinct if overlapping form of dirty work (Hughes, 1951, 1985, 1962; Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999; Simpson *et al.*, 2012) that describes the function and sociological effects of particular types of organised relations. To date, dirty work has been understood to relate to tasks delegated to agents mandated to deal with problems, issues or peoples that threaten the solidarity or self-concept of a community (Hughes, 1962). It speaks to a set of dividing practices through which agents work to maintain the preferred order of organised systems by containing or removing 'matter out of place' (Douglas, 1966). Those individuals who act as agents of dirty work risk being tainted by their contact with matter out of place (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999) in so far as they remind us of our proximity to dirt and the fragility of the boundaries that are intended to keep dirt away (Douglas, 1966; Kreiner et al. 2006). Until now such taint is assumed to take just three forms: physical, social and moral (Ashforth &

Kreiner, 1999). Based on our research with Samaritans we contend that emotion can stand as a fourth form of dirt and taint. In naming emotional dirt we seek to open up a sphere of research dedicated to understanding its emergence, nature and relational effects.

The emergence of emotional dirty work predates its naming. Samaritans have worked with burdensome and threatening emotions since the 1950s, while the presence of emotional dirt can be read into extant accounts of other types of physical work (Chiappetta-Swanson, 2005; Sanders, 2010). Our contribution in explicitly defining emotional dirt for the first time is to bring its presence and implications to the fore. We open up a conceptual space in which to look again at the challenges faced by those who work with the emotions of others, in the hope of better understanding the nature and effects of this particular form of dirty work. Future research on the emergence of emotional dirty work might consider: why certain occupations are required to engage with the emotional dirt of others; whether engagement in emotional dirty work reflects a formal or informal requirement of employment, and; the degree to which emotional dirt is acknowledged and accepted by those inside and outside the occupations engaged in such work.

As to the nature of emotional dirty work we have identified it as that which requires engagement with the expressed feelings of others' (customers, clients, callers) that threaten the preferred order of a given individual or group. We have in mind emotions that are deemed out of place, contextually inappropriate, burdensome or taboo. In common with Douglas (1966) we note that such matter out of place is contextually relative and socially constructed in so far as emotional dirt is in the eye of the beholder rather than an objective state (Dick, 2005). Emotional dirt is to be observed in the work of Samaritans where clients perceive there is nowhere else to share their problematic feelings, or; where organisations, institutions or communities fail to provide required support in dealing with the burdensome

emotions that arise from daily living or working (Fine, 1996; Frost, 2003; Gabriel, 2012). Given the contextually relative and socially constructed nature of dirt it is likely that what constitutes ‘emotional dirt’ will vary across occupations. Whether and why anger, ecstasy, despair, joviality, desire or rage are deemed ‘dirty’ in the work of a particular occupational context will need to be elucidated in future research so that we might begin to understand how the varying nature of dirt effects the character and experience of labourers, while also being mindful of the similarities that unite them.

Finally, in considering the relational effects of emotional dirty work we have focused on the potential for occupational taint. In so doing we have moved beyond more traditional concerns with the negative psychological effects of emotional labour (e.g. exhaustion, burnout and stress) to focus on the sociological costs of inducing or suppressing feeling in order to produce the proper state of mind in others (Hochschild, 1983). That is not to say that that a psychological lens might not enlighten future understanding of emotional dirty work. We recognise that psychological resilience may be an important factor in determining which Samaritans complete training and remain in service. There is also work to be done on understanding how different individuals cope with the immediate and long-term effects of handling the burdensome emotions of others and, relatedly, their relative ability to feel good about such work. Such concerns are however outwith the scope of this article.

Returning to the sociological implications of Samaritan work, our research suggests that performing emotional labour with respect to emotional dirt (e.g. in relation to those who feel suicidal, lonely or despairing, or those with socially unacceptable sexual feelings) is to invite a visceral response from those outside the occupation: a response that speaks to a suspicion that the worker is somehow blemished or spoiled (Kreiner et al. 2006) by their proximity to emotional dirt – it evokes the question ‘why would you want to do that?’ From the

perspective of Samaritans the only people who fully understand why you would want to ‘do that’ are fellow emotional dirty workers. They appreciate that while labouring with negative, burdensome and tainting emotions can be difficult work it is also satisfying work. As considered elsewhere in the extant literature, difficult and tainted work can be rewarding work in so far as it affords a sense of pride, satisfaction or interest (Meara, 1974; Ackroyd & Crowdy, 1990; Tyler, 2012). To this end Samaritans speak of the ‘good call’ that allows satisfaction in the deployment of newly acquired skills in empathetic listening and care (Korczynski, 2003) and the ‘privilege’ of being there. There are limits to what might be done for or to a client such that the experience of emotional labour is heavily contingent on the overarching organisational context (Lindebaum and Fielden, 2011). All the same, the intra-occupational relational effect of emotional dirty work can be to increase the worker’s sense of social solidarity. Samaritans referred to this in terms of an intense sense of community and belonging based in part on a collective understanding of the value and challenges of the work they do.

Conclusion

To conclude, this article contributes to our understanding of the manner in which dirt is organised within and across organisational boundaries, paying particular attention to the sociological consequences of the identification, conduct and experience of emotional dirty work. Just as there are workers who physically clean the streets or tackle social deprivation or enforce moral codes, so too there are those who manage the burdensome and disruptive emotions of others. As with other forms of dirt, dealing with emotions that are burdensome, threatening and out-of-place is important in so far as such work is necessary for the smooth functioning of wider organisational and societal systems, whether at the level of organisational toxins or community well being (Frost 2003). In the case of Samaritans there is clear evidence to suggest that they engage in performances of emotional labour to manage

both their own emotions and the emotions of callers, such labour being intensified in the case of very strong emotions that are positioned as dirty in that they threaten preferred social orders (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). In this sense, dirty emotions have the capacity to taint those who handle them; it is this taint that we argue is a sociological consequence of the performance of emotional labour as emotional dirty work. Through the provision of an explicit definition of emotional dirt and an indication of the complexity of its consequences we have opened up a space for research that might usefully explore the relationships between emotional dirt, emotional labour and emotional taint in as yet unconsidered contexts.

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